

# Character Class

## Duskblade -- Master of Sword and Spell

By Skip Williams



The **D&D** game's arcane spells allow characters to accomplish dramatic things on the battlefield -- wizards are justly feared. Still, there's something deeply satisfying about defeating a powerful enemy with naked steel. The duskblade class from *Player's Handbook II* melds arcane power with straight-up fighting ability. Some duskblades forget that they can fill two roles in an adventuring party and tend to favor either their martial or arcane sides. Such characters never quite achieve their full potential. Other duskblades can lead the charge into battle and toss off a few spells to even the odds when things get tough. Such characters are deadly in battle thanks to the broad array of options they have available.

### Assets

The duskblade class offers excellent combat power and magical potential. Here's a look at what you get when you choose a duskblade.



- **Good Attack Bonus:** A duskblade's base attack bonus is +1 per duskblade level -- the best in the game. As a duskblade, you can expect to hit what you attack.
- **Good Fortitude and Will Saves:** Duskblades use the best progression for Fortitude saves and for Will saves (see Table 3-1 in the *Player's Handbook*). Duskblades are both physically and mentally resilient.
- **Arcane Spells:** A duskblade learns arcane spells from the duskblade spell list, which, though short, includes spells for both offense and defense. The duskblade spell list also includes spells that enhance your physical fighting abilities.
- **Spontaneous Spellcasting:** Duskblades don't use spellbooks. Like a sorcerer, a duskblade chooses a personal repertoire of spells that are ready to cast almost all the time. You have a daily limit on the number of spells you can cast, but you can freely cast any spell you know until your limit is reached. You can cast a particular spell several times in a day without needing to guess which spells to prepare ahead of time.
- **Good Weapon Selection:** Duskblades are proficient with all simple and martial weapons, which gives them access to some of the best weapons in the game. You have plenty of combat options when your spells fail or when you feel the need to conserve your spells.
- **Good Skill Points:** Though a duskblade receives only two skill points per class level, most duskblades have high Intelligence scores because Intelligence governs their spells (and other magical powers). High

Intelligence brings extra skill points to spend.

- **Arcane Attunement:** Starting at 1st level, a duskblade learns to use *dancing lights*, *detect magic*, *flare*, *ghost sound*, and *read magic* as spell-like abilities. You can use these powers a combined total of times each day equal to three plus your Intelligence modifier. These powers don't count against your number of spells known or against the spells you can cast each day.
- **Combat Casting:** At 2nd level, a duskblade gains Combat Casting as a bonus feat.
- **Arcane Channeling:** Starting at 3rd level, a duskblade can use a standard action to deliver touch-range spells he knows through his weapon as a melee attack, provided that the spell has a casting time of one standard action or less. A successful attack delivers normal damage from the weapon and delivers the spell as well. Casting a spell this way does not provoke an attack of opportunity.

Starting at 13th level, a duskblade can use this power as part of the full attack action, and the channeled spell affects each target the duskblade hits in melee during that round.

- **Quick Cast:** Starting at 5th level, a duskblade can cast one spell each day as a swift action, provided that the spell has a casting time of one standard action or less. This power is usable twice a day at 10th level, three times a day at 15th level, and four times a day at 20th level.
- **Spell Power:** Starting at 6th level, a duskblade gains a +2 bonus on caster level checks to overcome a foe's spell resistance after he strikes that foe in combat. The bonus lasts until the encounter ends. At 11th level, the bonus rises to +3. At 18th level, the bonus increases to +4.

## Weaknesses

The duskblade's martial and arcane potential come at a price. Keep the following in mind when considering a duskblade character.

- **Fairly Low Hit Points:** The duskblade's eight-sided hit dice give the character a respectable number of hit points for an arcane spellcaster but not a great total for a fighting character. As a duskblade, you can take a few hits, but you must avoid getting in over your head.
- **Fairly Weak Armor Class:** Duskblades are proficient with all types of armor and all shields except tower shields. They can build up formidable Armor Classes just by wearing armor. Unfortunately, most armor interferes with the duskblade's arcane spells, which limits the character's Armor Class.

To reduce this, the armored mage class feature allows a duskblade to avoid some arcane spell failure chances. Starting at 1st level, a duskblade can ignore the arcane spell failure chance from light armor or a light shield when casting a duskblade spell. Starting at 4th level, this power extends to medium armor. At 7th level this power extends to heavy shields.

- **Poor Reflex Saves:** Duskblades have the worst progression for Reflex saves (see Table 3-1 in the *Player's Handbook*). Duskblades are poor at avoiding effects that affect whole areas. Duskblades have access to defensive spells that improve their saving throws or even make some saving throws unnecessary, but using them saps their magical potential for the day.
- **Limited Magical Options:** A duskblade begins play knowing two 0-level spells and two 1st-level spells from the duskblade spell list, plus one additional 0-level spell for each point of Intelligence bonus. A duskblade learns one additional spell at 2nd level and each level beyond that. The duskblade spell list is limited to spells that improve fighting ability or allow the caster to affect a handful of foes.

Once you choose your personal assortment of spells, your selection remains more or less permanently fixed. You have a limited ability to change your repertoire, but for the most part you choose your spells

only once.

## Playing a Classy Duskblade

Playing a duskblade well takes a measure of planning and nerve. Consider the following as you approach your career:

### Be Bold

You can fight just about as well as any of the strictly martial classes such as fighter or paladin, at least for a short while, and your arcane spells can pack quite a punch. You have enough fighting stamina to walk in your party's front rank and set the pace during an adventure.

### Be Flexible

Be ready to use all of your capabilities during an encounter. Your arcane channeling and spell power abilities require you to enter melee with your foes, so be ready to close with the enemy. Sometimes, however, it pays to hang back for a round and soften up the opposition with a spell. In other situations, the best approach will be to fight a while, then fall back and cast spells. Learn to assess a situation quickly so you can act appropriately.

### Integrate Spells and Physical Attacks

It's tough to take advantage of your high attack bonus unless you're willing to mix it up with foes at least once in a while. Your arcane spells give you more options than most other fighting characters have, so use them well. Start by thinking about how you'll handle combat and choose spells that will help you make your approach work.

If you favor melee, you can do well with spells that make you more capable. *Blade of blood* makes your weapon more potent. *Stretch weapon* and *doom scarabs* give you new tricks to bedevil your foes. If you prefer to keep the enemy a little farther off, consider spells such as *Kelgore's fire bolt*, *seeking ray*, and *slashing dispel*. If you plan to serve as your group's main fighter, add spells that can help keep you in a fight, such as *deflect*, *crown of protection*, or *sonic shield*.

No matter how you plan to fight, keep in mind that your arcane channeling ability only works when you hit a target with a melee attack, so plan to go toe-to-toe with the enemy at least some of the time. Make sure your repertoire of spells includes at least a few that have touch range. Even low-level spells such as *chill touch* and *ghoul's touch* can prove effective when you channel them through a weapon.

As you advance in level, choose spells that enhance your fighting style or give you new tricks to use on the battlefield. For example, if you've emphasized melee, spells such as *crown of might* and *animalistic power* can boost your potential. You can give yourself new melee options, however, with powers such as *halt*, *dimension hop*, and *energy surge*.

### Use that Magic

You don't know many spells, but you have a fair number of them available, especially if you have a high Intelligence score. Use your spells and spell-like abilities to gain an edge over your foes whenever you can. It's usually not wise to burn through all your spells during the day's first few encounters, but it's an equally bad idea to hold back when you or your friends are taking a beating.

Don't forget the spell-like abilities that your arcane attunement class feature gives you. *Detect magic* can prove useful when assessing an area for hidden dangers as well as finding loot. *Read magic* can help your group make

quick use of any scrolls you discover. A quick *dancing lights* effect can help you and your allies see, and it's also useful for distracting opponents and throwing off pursuit. *Flare* and *ghost sound* can make enemies think twice before messing with you.

## Remember Your Friends

You'll be at your best when you balance your fighting ability, spellcasting, and fairly weak personal defense. That's easiest to achieve with help from your allies.

**Fighting Allies:** Characters such as barbarians and fighters have more hit points and usually at least slightly better Armor Class than you have. You might be tempted to leave the bulk of the combat chores to such allies. This isn't necessarily a bad thing, especially when you need time to cast a spell or two to get into fighting trim.

Remember, however, that you're a fighting character, too. Don't hang back too long when a fight breaks out. When you join a fight, keep track of what your fighting allies are doing. Do your utmost to make sure those allies don't become surrounded or flanked. Try to gauge the opposition. Double up with an ally to defeat powerful opponents quickly. When facing hordes of lesser foes, form a fighting line or ring and engage as many foes as you can.

Remember that some of your spells can affect your allies, too. Spells such as *animalistic power*, *energy aegis*, or *toxic weapon* can give a boost to a fighting ally.

**Stealthy Allies:** Stealthy characters such as rogues and rangers often need the same kinds of combat support that fighting characters do, and stealthy characters also can benefit from spells you place on them or their equipment.

As noted earlier, your spell-like abilities can prove useful whenever your group scrutinizes an area. You probably aren't very stealthy yourself, but your presence on a scouting trip can help finish a reconnaissance more quickly, and your fighting ability and spells can help get your group's scout out of danger. If you stay behind by choice or by necessity, be ready to go to the rescue if a stealthy ally gets into trouble. In a stand-up fight, remember that characters with the sneak attack ability need combat support in the form of an ally who helps them flank enemies. Get used to fighting in partnership with such characters,

**Arcane Spellcasters:** Wizards, sorcerers, and bards can pack a real punch with their spells, and they often serve as the party's heavy artillery. These characters are notoriously vulnerable to physical attacks thanks to their poor Armor Classes and very low hit points. They will rely on you to keep the opposition at a distance, and it's in your best interest to do so.

Be sure any fellow arcane spellcasters in your group are aware of your magical capabilities, and encourage them to choose spells (if they can) to handle situations that you cannot. Develop a plan for using offensive spells against enemies. For example, you can be very effective at distracting or eliminating opposing spellcasters and leaders. You can handle those tasks while other spellcasters deal with the main opposition.

**Divine Spellcasters:** Most of what applies to arcane spellcasters in your group also applies to divine spellcasters, though most divine spellcasters are a little less vulnerable and more self-sufficient than arcane spellcasters. In any case, get friendly and stay friendly with your party's cleric, druid, or paladin. This character's healing spells can keep you on your feet when you take damage.

## Some Key Equipment

Your spells are your most important asset, but you won't get far without the right gear. The essentials for you include:

- **Primary Melee Weapon:** Always carry a martial weapon. A longsword or battle axe is a good choice if you plan to use a shield (and you probably should). A greatsword or great axe is a good choice if you don't plan to use a shield (the right mix of defensive spells and perhaps the Combat Expertise feat might make up for the lack). You might also want to devote a feat to an exotic weapon proficiency such as bastard sword, if you wish to maximize the damage you can deal while using a shield.

No matter how you plan to fight, a masterwork weapon is worth the money if you can afford it. If you plan to fight with your primary melee weapon most of the time, a magical weapon is a necessity.

- **Backup Melee Weapons:** With the right selection of spells, you can attack your foes even without any weapons. It's always a good idea, however, to have a second melee weapon available in case you lose your primary weapon or it proves ineffective. Make sure this weapon deals a different kind of damage from your primary weapon. If you normally use a longsword (a slashing weapon), for example, consider a morningstar (which deals both bludgeoning and piercing damage) as a backup.

Having a light slashing weapon is a real lifesaver when a monster swallows you whole or when you must fight in a restricted space. When you're literally in the belly of a beast, it may prove hard to cast a spell.

- **Ranged Weapon:** Your foes won't always oblige you by staying within melee reach, so carry a martial ranged weapon even if your focus is your melee potential. A longbow has excellent range and deals good damage. If you have a high Strength score (and you probably do), get a composite longbow that gives you your full Strength bonus on damage.
- **Armor and Shield:** Defensive spells such as *deflect* and *sonic shield* can protect you, but they're no substitute for proper armor. At the beginning of your career, you're effectively limited to light armor (unless you want to risk having your arcane spells fail). Start with a light shield and the best light armor you can afford. That's probably studded leather.

When you reach 4th level, move up to medium armor, preferably a breastplate unless you have a good reason to maintain your mobility. If you use a shield, switch to a heavy shield when you reach 7th level.

You'll find magic armor worth the extra expense, but don't spend too much of your cash on armor you're just going to sell after gaining a level or two.

- **Backup Spells:** Every spellcaster runs out of spells sooner or later, so it pays to carry a few spares. Scrolls are fairly cheap, and they allow you access to duskblade spells that you have yet to learn. A good collection of scrolls might include spells that you don't use very often, such as *stand* or *rouse*, and spells to help get you out of trouble, such as *dimension hop* and *regroup*.

A wand is a good choice for spells that you use often, such as *Kilgore's fire bolt* or *seeking ray*.

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## About the Author

Skip Williams keeps busy with freelance projects for several different game companies and was the Sage of *Dragon Magazine* for many years. Skip is a co-designer of the **D&D** 3rd Edition game and the chief architect of the *Monster Manual*. When not devising swift and cruel deaths for player characters, Skip putters in his kitchen or garden (rabbits and deer are not Skip's friends) or works on repairing and improving the century-old farmhouse that he shares with his wife, Penny, and a growing menagerie of pets.

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